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ABSTRACT

The Creative Learning Environment for Academic Redirection (CLEAR) Alternative program attempts to educate adolescents who have the ability to learn but are dysfunctional in school. The program serves students in grades 9-12 whose behaviors conform to the profile of students most likely to drop out of school. Most of the students who have participated in this "school-within-a-school" program are black. They have shown improvements in attendance, attitudes, and achievement. Other program goals could be accomplished if the program enters into a partnership with the Demonstration School Project (DSP) of the National Association of Black School Educators (NABSE). Elements of the DSP which can be of benefit to the CLEAR Alternative program are the following: (1) building school leadership; (2) developing a sense of mission; (3) establishing maximum expectations for students and staff; (4) developing academic and cultural excellence; (5) defining clear and specific curricula; (6) frequently monitoring student progress; (7) building a positive school climate; (8) involving parents and the community; and (9) promoting civic responsibility and participation by students and all school personnel. (VM)

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# The CLEAR Alternative: Possibilities for a NABSE Demonstration School Project"

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AT

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Adolescents trapped in the youth culture are a unique group among the current "at risk" learners for whom schools must provide. Preoccupied as these learners may be with self-discovery and experimentation, educators often find themselves on the losing end of the competition for their attention. While their abilities range generally from average to gifted, such adolescents may be dysfunctional as learners. Disinterest in subject matter, discontentment with family and disdain for formal authority mitigate against the academic success that might otherwise be theirs.

Providing meaningful educational experiences for such youngsters requires a keen sensitivity not only to the context in which these learners experience the schooling process, but also the priority education may not have in their lives presently. Therefore, the challenge for educators is to create an environment which values the uniqueness and uncertainty of adolescence but provides an alternative context where adolescent priorities can be reconsidered or re-established and energies rechanneled toward success in adulthood.

The CLEAR Alternative program at Cleveland Heights High School is one example of a reasoned attempt to accept the challenge of educating "at risk" youth caught up disadvantageously in their adolescence.
Let me provide a demographic picture of the Cleveland Heights-University Heights (Ohio) city school district. CH-UH is a suburban district east of Cleveland, Ohio. It enrolls 8300+ students of which 4461 are African American, 3709 are Caucasian, 114 are Asian, 49 are Hispanic. The per pupil expenditure is upwards of $5000 each. CHHS enrolls approximately 2900 students in grades 9-12. The teacher pupil ratio is 23:1.

Heights High has a long tradition of excellence and has graduated some of America's most outstanding individuals, as evidenced by it annual Distinguished Alumni Hall of Fame induction. Each year the high school celebrates its share of National Merit and National Achievement scholars. Traditionally, Heights students score above national norms on achievement and college entrance tests.

Obviously, CHHS has a fine academic program which meets the needs of many younsters and enjoys the support of the school community. Nevertheless, as the school has moved through a transition from an institution that was predominantly Caucasian and Jewish to one that today is majority African American and Protestant, it has responded to the challenge of providing for the needs of a diverse population of learners. The CLEAR Alternative is another in a series of "school within a school" programs which have existed in the high school since the late 1960's.

Now in its second year of operation, the Creative Learning Environment for Academic Redirection (CLEAR) Alternative serves approximately 200 students in grades 9-12, most of whom are African American. Identified through available achievement, attendance and disciplinary data, the target population, typically, is students who have displayed minimal academic success despite ability levels ranging from average to gifted. Many are chronically truant or involved in the disciplinary process habitually. Such behaviors conform generally to the profile of students most likely to drop out of school prior to graduation. Additionally, students' families may be problematic: some students may themselves be parents or chemically dependent, or criminal offenders or incorrigibles.

Once identified, students' potential for early school leaving is measured by a Dropout Assessment Instrument. Those exhibiting the greatest likelihood of dropping out are targeted for enrollment in the program. While participation is voluntary, targeted students and their parents/guardians are encouraged to take advantage of the enrollment opportunity. Pre-enrollment procedures include interviews conducted by CLEAR Alternative staff members and information sessions involving students already enrolled.

The general goals of the CLEAR Alternative are congruent and compatible with the conceptual elements of NABSE's Demonstration School Project (DSP) as outlined earlier by Dr. Adrienne Bailey. However, should CHHS decide to enter into a partnership with NABSE, the more explicit nature of DSP elements could only enhance the CLEAR Alternative. Proud as we are of the accomplishments attained thus far in terms of improved attendance, achievement and attitude among CLEAR Alternative students, we are a long way from reaching some of the goals established. NABSE's emphasis on cultural excellence, community involvement, civic responsibility and clarified curricula are just a few of the areas where the CLEAR Alternative could benefit. The kind of intensive staff development and technical assistance in these areas proposed by NABSE's Charles D. Moody Research and Development Institute would assist an effective program to maximize its potential. If we consider the CLEAR Alternative goals in light of the Demonstration School Project elements, we can illuminate the promise inherent in establishing a partnership with NABSE to improve the CLEAR Alternative.

NABSE

Cleveland Heights High School

CLEAR Alternative

GOALS

1) To create a voluntary, but recommended, structured, but nurturing, alternative learning environment for selected students in grades 9-12.

2) To design a model instructional delivery system composed of creative curricula, diverse learning opportunities, enlightened teachers, student advocates and continuous progress reporting for selected students in grades 9-12.

3) To marshal and cause to interact a multiplicity of resources for student advocacy which may impact positively upon the academic achievement, social development and cultural awareness of selected students in grades 9-12.

4) To identify and reduce the percentage of potential non-graduate school leavers among selected students in grades 9-12.

NABSE

DEMONSTRATION SCHOOL PROJECT

CONCEPTUAL ELEMENTS

1) Building School Leadership

2) Developing a Sense of Mission

3) Establishing Maximum Expectations for Students and Staff

4) Developing Academic and Cultural Excellence

5) Defining Clear and Explicit Curricula

6) Monitoring Student Progress Frequently

7) Building a Positive School Climate

8) Involving Parents and the Community

9) Promoting Civic Responsibility and Participation by Students and All School Personnel

**1) BUILDING SCHOOL LEADERSHIP**

- CLEAR Alternative staff has empowered itself by meeting weekly as a group and regularly in subject area teams. No other group in the school functions this way.

- Comraderie is excellent (Social gatherings and common lunch period)

- Staff is vocal about program issues and actively seeks solutions to problems.

- Several staff members are advisors or coaches of school activities (Student Council, football, basketball, golf, Gospel Choir, Dance)

**NEVERTHELESS,**

- CLEAR Council has suffered from staff hesitancy to empower students with decision-making authority.

- Non-advisors harbor some resentment of advisors who miss staff meetings as a result of schedule conflicts.

- Staff is uneasy sharing decision-making with administration and somewhat mistrustful. (High school is the "hotbed" of the Union.)

- Advocacy team has experienced a crisis in leadership due to staff cuts.

**THEREFORE,** objective parties such as the NABSE Institute team members could assist the staff to confront these issues in a non-threatening manner and facilitate their resolution. The CLEAR Alternative staff was extremely receptive to outside consultants involved with them last year. In addition staff with leadership potential could be aided to exhibit their skills in a more emergent manner

**2) DEVELOPING A SENSE OF MISSION**

- CLEAR Alternative staff participated in developing and refining the mission.

- Learning activities and programmatic procedures are developed with with a view to the mission.

- Mission statement addresses roles of students and parents as well as staff.

**NEVERTHELESS,**

- Advocacy concept is confounded with traditional school rules in matters of attendance and discipline.

- Alternative education concept conflicts with traditional behaviors with which a majority of staff is more familiar. (Four teachers are veterans of alternative programs out of the fourteen)

- Consensus is difficult to achieve in attendance and disciplinary matters.

- Identification of students who may be adequately served by the program is problematic. More than 25% continue truancy patterns.

**THEREFORE,** partnership with NABSE could assist the staff to examine its mission, specify its needs, lend moral support and promote the staff's role as alternative educators who advocate for learners. The Institute team could share development of a research design for assessing longitudinally the factors which may account for student success or failure in CLEAR. The district has no research department.

**3) ESTABLISHING MAXIMUM EXPECTATIONS FOR STUDENTS AND STAFF**

- Academic expectations are communicated and reinforced regularly by each teacher to students and parents.

- Incentives are utilized to reinforce achievement of academic expectations.

- Expectations for behavior are well articulated.

**NEVERTHELESS,**

- Traditional approaches to chronic truancy and discipline are the norm generally.

- The negotiated agreement is a barrier to fulfillment of maximum staff expectations e.g. length of meetings, compensation for inservice.

- Unrealistic comparisons between alternative and traditional expectations are a source of controversy.

- CLEAR Ecology course was rejected by several staff members as a strategy for teaching and reinforcing positive personal development. (Materials for the course were provided to each teacher.)

**THEREFORE,** using its data bank of resources regarding successful programs, the NABSE Institute team could offer non-traditional approaches and substantiate their effectiveness with documentation. **Current Directions,** a resource guide, already specifies 200 effective programs throughout USA.

**4) DEVELOPING ACADEMIC AND CULTURAL EXCELLENCE**

- Reinforcement for academic excellence is provided through teacher commendations to students.

- Awards programs include parents/guardians.

- Speakers and role models meet with students in large and small groups.

- Reinforcement for cultural excellence is provided through field trips and excursions to events of cultural interest (e.g. Jesse Jackson at Front Row, Buy Freedom Convention with Tony Brown, HABSE/MLK program.)

- Students and staff support peers and teacher involved in Gospel Choir.

**NEVERTHELESS,**

- Cultural excellence is an unfamiliar concept to most CLEAR staff members.

- The majority of staff do not share the same culture as the majority of students.

- There is resistance to considering race and culture as factors associated with the schooling process.

- Dissonance between cultures limits teachers' ability to recognize promote and generate activities and events which may impact students positively.

- Some staff members are guilty of subtle racial remarks or thoughtless slurs or assumptions and judgmental commentary.

**THEREFORE,** the NABSE Institute could illuminate the concept of cultural excellence and assist staff to understand the correlation with academic excellence. Providing resource persons who are knowledgeable in facilitating groups to analyze race and culture would be of great assistance.

**5) DEFINING CLEAR AND EXPLICIT CURRICULA**

- CLEAR Alternative staff assessed traditional course curricula and modified them to suit pace and learning styles.

- Individualized approaches to traditional subjects require curricular modifications.

- Teachers meet regularly in subject area groups to refine curricula, share materials and order new ones.

**NEVERTHELESS,**

- Disparity among teachers of the same subject persists.

- Staff preferences for textbooks differ vastly from traditional teacher choices in the same sequential subject areas.

- New courses unique to the program which emphasize personal growth should be developed more fully.

**THEREFORE,** a partnership with NABSE might provide the impetus to develop new courses and sensitize the CLEAR Alternative staff to the importance of personal development training for students who have few opportunities outside the school to gain it.

**6) MONITORING STUDENT PROGRESS FREQUENTLY**

- Bi-weekly commendations given to students.
- Parent phone calls initiated for positive reinforcement.
- Progress charts are maintained in classrooms.
- Motivational charts are used by several teachers.
- Students of the Week/Month are identified in some courses.
- "Most Improved Student" awards are given.

**NEVERTHELESS,**

- Parent contacts about progress are inconsistent.
- Feedback to students is inconsistent.

**THEREFORE,** the NABSE team may facilitate generation of additional strategies which have been utilized successfully elsewhere.

**7) BUILDING A POSITIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE**

- CLEAR Alternative program is located in a specific area of building.
- Counseling for inappropriate behavior is readily available.
- Problem students are "staffed" during weekly team meetings.
- Disruptions of classroom activity is a rare occurrence.

**NEVERTHELESS,**

- Several teachers rely upon traditional disciplinary procedures.
- Parents are not necessarily viewed as partners in education.

**THEREFORE,** effective strategies for assessing and improving climate would be beneficial. The NABSE team might propose schools or districts where positive climate has been maximized as a resource.

**8) INVOLVING PARENTS AND THE COMMUNITY**

- Parent orientation sessions
- Parent conferences

- Calls to homes re: truancy or non-attendance.

- Community advocates are solicited and invited to visit to program (Force, Browns, Holmes, etc.)

**NEVERTHELESS,**

- Parents are reluctant to attend meetings once student is enrolled in program.
- Staff is reluctant to contact parents if first conversation does not produce modified behavior.

- Staff is somewhat judgmental about family life styles which differ drastically from their own.

**THEREFORE,** learning new methods of outreach to parents and ways to develop non-judgmental attitudes which may impact upon students would increase the ability to value parents as partners. The number of individuals in the community who might serve as role models or advocates may be increased if the context in which they could operate with students is broadened.

**9) PROMOTING CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY AND PARTICIPATION BY STUDENTS AND ALL SCHOOL PERSONNEL**

- Students and some staff involved in judicial election campaign.

- Students involved in gubernational election campaign (phone banks on weekends)

- Students worked for school levy (literature drops)

- Students participated in world hunger benefit program.

**NEVERTHELESS,**

- Participation in these efforts is limited.

- Fewer staff than students are involved.

**THEREFORE,** an effort which seeks to bring the community and the schools closer together would facilitate greater cooperation between them.

**CONCLUSION**

The CLEAR Alternative is an effective program for many students and has the potential to impact even more. The program however, would benefit from a partnership with an objective outside entity to stabilize and reinforce those

aspects which are working. Through the Charles D. Moody Institute technical assistance and staff development targeted to increasing achievement for African Amerian students can only benefit programs such as the CLEAR Alternative.

These are just a few of the possibilities in terms of the advantages there might be to establishing a partnership with NABSE. Because a plan of action would have to be mutually agreeable to both parties and the terms of such an arrangement clearly delineated with regard to role, function and responsibility, there is every reason to believe that a collaborative partnership of this nature would have numerous benefits. Since there is an affiliate of NABSE located in the Cleveland Heights-Unversity Heights school district, the opportunity to support the effort would be enhanced. Generating funds for specific programmatic activities, participating in community advocacy strategies to stimulate involvement and serving as an all purpose resource are just some of the ways that an affiliate of NABSE could be helpful. Whether or not there is a NABSE affiliate operating within a school district will not preclude interested schools from consideration as potential partners.

There are additional benefits which may be of interest. These include the professional development seminars of the Moody Institute which will be available in various locales and open to all educators of African Americans. Enrollees in such programs will be able to opt for graduate credit or continuing education units granted by partner universities.

Several major publishing companies have made commitments to NABSE to provide a variety of materials and equipment to Demonstration School Project sites at no cost. Most of these commitments include training for teachers and continuous monitoring.

The CLEAR Alternative is an example of the kind of program you may have in your district which has potential for increasing the achievement of African American or other culturally identifiable groups of learners significantly, but needs a boost to accelerate its effectiveness. NABSE's Demonstration School Project is scheduled for implementation in 1988. Letters of interest should be forwarded to the national office located at 2816 Georgia Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20001. My superintendent is interested in ways to capitalize upon NABSE as a resource. It may be one kind of partnership to which you and your district may want to give consideration as well.